

COMMON ENROLLMENT SYSTEMS ISSUES AND CONSIDERATIONS

Enrolling their child in school can be a confusing process for parents and guardians.

In addition to their neighborhood school, school districts may offer magnet schools options. Magnets typically specialize in a curricular focus such as science and technology, foreign languages, or arts. Districts may offer other alternative specialized schooling options--for example, for subgroups of students, such as students with particular types of disabilities. Charter schools may be an option, in many urban areas in particular.

Common enrollment systems are promoted as a way to help parents and guardians navigate the K-12 education landscape. This brochure provides basic information about common enrollment systems and identify potential advantages and disadvantages for parents, guardians, public education advocates, and policymakers to consider.

What are common enrollment systems?

While the specifics of common enrollment systems vary, families are generally provided a single paper or online application, along with a list of schooling options and a range of information about those schools aimed at informing the preferences they submit.

Families submit their top-ranked preferences and a computer algorithm matches those preferences with available seats.

Varying versions of common enrollment systems

have been adopted in New Orleans, the District of Columbia, and Newark and Camden in New Jersey, among other places.

Administrator decisions on just what information about each school to provide, and how to display it, are a key factor impacting how user-friendly and effective a common enrollment system is. Administrators are challenged to find a balance between providing more information about schools for a fuller picture, or less information to make it easier to use.

Satisfaction with common enrollment systems appears to be mixed. Some parents appreciate the simplicity. Others are dissatisfied that they did not receive their top preference. Efforts to “game” the system to maximize the likelihood of receiving one’s top preference are predictable. These can reduce the fairness, credibility and effectiveness of the system.

Advantages

The advantage is clear. Parents can use a single, common enrollment mechanism to indicate which school they want their children to attend. Common enrollment systems are designed to simplify the enrollment process for families and schools. It is easy to understand and appreciate this source of appeal to busy parents and guardians.

A well-designed common enrollment system potentially can increase fairness where all parents indicate preferences and are provided with a common, well-presented, user-friendly set of information about

the different schooling options. Currently, some parents are able to “work the system” to secure their preferences even as other parents are unaware of their schooling options, with limited assistance readily available to them.

Disadvantages

The simplicity can be deceptive. Information in the enrollment package is often limited, sometimes because it is either unavailable or is considered too voluminous or confusing. (see Recommendations section below)

Second, common enrollment can create an illusion that schools are available when in reality they may

not be, simply as a matter of geography and transportation.

Third, common enrollment systems in areas with charter schools suggest a false equivalence between charter schools, on the one hand, and traditional, magnet, and other alternative public schools, on the other. Charter schools will tend to look more comparable to other types of options than they actually are when listed together with other taxpayer-funded schools. There are important differences parents and guardians will want to be aware of when identifying their preferences. **(see box)**

Clear and readily accessible information for parents and guardians on how each individual school,

CHARTER SCHOOLS CONSIDERATIONS TO KEEP IN MIND

Charter schools are publicly funded but privately operated. Unlike other public schools, which are operated by school districts. Charters are operated by small groups of independent individuals, or by nonprofit or for-profit charter “chains” which often are not based in the local community. Charter schools operate under different laws providing for fewer student and parental safeguards. This has several important implications. Charter schools:

- ▶ tend to hire younger, less experienced teachers who are also less likely to be licensed in their teaching field
- ▶ may or may not provide transportation and free, reduced-price, or any school meals
- ▶ may provide different course and extracurricular activity options than local public schools
- ▶ may or may not disclose their student conduct and discipline policies and processes to parents prior to enrollment. Some charters have very low student suspension rates and others have extremely high ones. Parents need to know what expectations they are signing up for before they submit preferences
- ▶ tend, overall with exceptions, to under-enroll students with disabilities, particularly students with more severe disabilities, and English language learners
- ▶ in some cases are managed by for-profit entities, diverting money otherwise available to meet student needs
- ▶ often are not subject to open (school board) meeting rules, restricting parental access to information and opportunities for input into school policies
- ▶ often are not subject to freedom-of-information or open-records rules
- ▶ tend to be even more segregated than public schools, disadvantageous to students preparing to enter an increasingly diverse adult world

In part because of the looser regulations and oversight they operate under, the charter sector has been plagued by financial scandal, with some charter operators inflating enrollment to boost revenues, billing for services not provided, or using public funds for personal gain.

charter and public, fares on criteria shown in the box needs to be a built-in feature of any common enrollment system that truly is providing a service to parents, students, and our communities.

Despite these concerns, many individual charter schools are good schools and may offer a good fit for some students. NEA's charter schools policy supports the minority, at present, of charter schools that operate as fully public schools—that is, those that adhere to standards of accountability, transparency, and equity identified in [NEA's Policy Statement on Charter Schools](#).

Recommendations

Potential advantages and disadvantages of adopting a common enrollment system are offered above.

Where common enrollment systems already exist, or are under development or revision, we offer the following recommendations on how they might be evaluated and improved.

Showing overall test scores for each school is easy. But neither test scores, graduation rates, or any other single indicator should ever be used as a sound indicator of student learning and development or the quality of a school. Any single individual piece of data can be a badly misleading indicator of a school's contribution to individual student learning and development. **(see box to the right)**

In order to make informed preferences, parents and guardians should be provided with ready access to additional information, such as:

- ▶ parent/guardian survey information on the learning environment in the school. Is it supportive and nurturing, and welcoming? Harsh and punitive? Welcoming to parents?
- ▶ course offerings, including sciences, foreign languages, music, physical education, arts, and college and career-readiness offerings
- ▶ class size information
- ▶ proportion of the school's teachers who are licensed and teaching within their licensure field
- ▶ student attrition (not advancing to the next grade)

rates. Where these are high, tests scores and other standard indicators of student learning will tend to be artificially inflated.

- ▶ student suspension and expulsion rates
- ▶ the school's student conduct and discipline policies and processes. These need to be transparent to parents and students, and known prior to enrollment decisions.
- ▶ proportions of students with disabilities and English language learner students enrolled. If these are substantially below the local averages, parents are right to inquire why. Low enrollment of these student populations and of low income students tends to artificially inflate schoolwide test score results.
- ▶ whether the school provides transportation, and of what sort
- ▶ whether the school provides free and reduced-price meals, or meals at all
- ▶ extracurricular activity options

Democracy Prep Public Charter School boasts that "Nearly 90% of all [our] high school graduates currently attend four-year colleges." That may be true but enrollment data suggest a different story. Democracy Prep's flagship Harlem Charter School had 119 students in its class of 2018 when they were in ninth grade. By the time they reached twelfth grade the class was down to only 34 students. Roughly seven out of every ten students had simply disappeared. Touting college acceptance of those who remain paints a misleading picture. What happened to the rest of them?

<http://dphhs.democracyprep.org/college/>
National Center for Education Statistics,
Common Core of Data, New York State
Education Department.

- ▶ access to career and mental health counseling services
- ▶ information in the charter schools box in this brochure that is not otherwise listed here.



Information needs to be presented in a way that is clear and accessible to the parents and guardians who will use it.

The federal Every Student Succeeds Act requires publication of accessible school “report card” information by school districts. Administrators of common enrollment systems will find some of the information listed above in these report cards.

The [federal Civil Rights Data Collection](#) makes school and district information mentioned in this brochure directly available to parents and guardians as well as to schools and districts.

In addition to the information provided through the common enrollment system on each school to all parents, ready access to reliable, well-informed human assistance is essential. Parents and guardians will need help understanding and using the system and obtaining answers to their questions.

Common enrollment system administrators need to make information and assistance options available in foreign languages spoken by parents and guardians in the community.